Sermon – Filled with Expectation
Scripture – Isaiah 12: 2-6, Luke 3:7-16
Sunday, December 15, 2024
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Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading, Isaiah 12:2-6, is a song of praise by ancient Hebrews who experienced the joy of God's salvation and who waited with hope for the day all humanity would recognize and submit themselves to God's loving and just ways. May our hearts and minds be open to the hearing and understanding of the word of God.

Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
For the Lord God is my strength and my might;
God has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day; Give thanks to the Lord, call on God's name; make known God's deeds among the nations; proclaim that God's name is exalted.
Sing praises to the Lord, for God has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth,
Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.
Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Luke 3:7-16. As ancient Hebrews draw water from the wells of salvation and announce the character of God's governance, the Gospel of Luke introduces us to John, the Baptizer, who also draws water from the wells of salvation in baptism. Luke 3 places the ministry of John in historical context, in light of the prophet Isaiah, and then gives us the most complete account of his preaching in the New Testament. John's message is a call to repentance with actions that demonstrate a changed heart. Hear now the word of God.

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor;' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply John said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" John said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" John said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Amen.

The title of the sermon: Filled with Expectation

Text: As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts… Luke 3:15a

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, for the honesty of John and for the expectations and questions which filled the hearts of those he met in the wilderness, we give you thanks. As we gather in this season of advent and expectation, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

I've heard it said
That people come into our lives for a reason
Bringing something we must learn
And we are led to those who help us most to grow if we let them.
And we help them in return…

These words, from the song "Changed for Good" introduce an honest and heart-warming encounter between two friends whose choices have led them down very different roads in the musical "Wicked." Gregory Maguire has written a creative and thought-provoking prequel to the early twentieth century children's novel by Frank Baum, then Broadway musical, then beloved movie "The Wizard of Oz" about the lives of the witches—Glinda, the good witch of the North, Elphaba, the wicked witch of the West, and her sister Nessarose, the wicked witch of the East, on whom Dorothy's house falls in the land of Oz.

Peter, Paul and I first saw the musical in Chicago almost 20 years ago after it opened in June of 2005 and revisited the story in the newly released movie version this past Thanksgiving.

In Dale Rogers' study, one will find Dorothy's slippers as a door stop. When we welcomed the Stated Clerk of our denomination, the Rev. Jihyun Oh, for the 2024 Bay Weekend and discovered she spent her formative years in Kansas, Dale and some of our talented singers put together a musical presentation which included the Scarecrow, "If I Only Had a Brain," the Tinman "If I only Had a Heart," and the Lion, "If I Only Had Courage" reiterating that when the Church as the Body of Christ serves with intelligence, heart, and courage, people's lives are "changed for good."

In 1964 Dr. Henry Littlefield, Headmaster of York School in Monterey, CA who hired Peter right out of college, published in the *American Quarterly* the revolutionary analysis of "The Wizard of Oz" which symbolized the late nineteenth century monetary debate with Dorothy representing the common American, the Scarecrow the farmer, the Tinman the dehumanized laborer, the Lion the roaring but cowardly politician, and the Yellow Brick Road the gold standard for currency. Entwined in this dream-like narrative is the dichotomy of the good and evil in American Populism, Capitalism and industrialization.

The twenty-first century prequal "Wicked" challenges us to wonder about, to ask and to rethink our understanding of good and evil. It presents us with the age-old theological question "from where does evil come?" and then encourages us to see good and evil in a new light. We learn from this story the paradoxical truth that sometimes baffles us in our own lives, that what appears to be good is not always good and what appears to be evil is not always evil.

We learn the wicked witch is a thoughtful, caring, and substantial person who is an advocate for the oppressed and who has been unfairly persecuted herself because she is different. We learn although the good witch is popular and shines with physical beauty, she is superficial, self-absorbed, and shows little personal substance, fortitude or concern for others. The contrast between the good and wicked witches sets the stage for the dichotomy between good and evil with all its complexities and an opportunity to embrace the truth that each of us is both good and evil. The choices we make and the ways we treat one another reflect our potential for good or evil.

Those who were in the wilderness with John, the Baptist, were longing to be changed for good. They were filled with expectation, searching for meaning, and seeking a connection with their Creator God. Throughout the biblical story the wilderness plays a significant role in the spiritual journeys of God's children. It is a place of prayer and insight, challenge and temptation, revelation and growth. In the wilderness, away from the order and structure of life, one can see more clearly, respond more authentically, and experience transformation.

Perhaps the most appealing aspect of the interaction between John and these followers is John's honest, straightforward, and practical approach. He draws them to himself with his authenticity. When John told them not to get overly confident in their "birthright" as religious people or become too uppity about who they were, they heard the essence of what he was saying and did not hesitate to ask him, "What then shall we do? What does God require of us?"

Three times people ask John this question in response to his call for change. Three times John offers a specific guideline. Besides the honesty of the "one crying in the wilderness," what stands out is the specificity of John's message! Today's gospel reminds us that God calls each of us in unique and specific ways.

John's ethical teachings are by no means radical. He merely provides the practical foundation of sound behavior. John asks folks to be willing to give assistance to those in need and share what they have. John encourages them to make an honest living and treat people with respect and dignity in whatever work they do!

There is often a danger, according to the Interpreter's Commentary, *that even people who think they are religious forget this fact…that first we must be honest and considerate and kind. When these fundamentals are neglected, all efforts at spiritual development are simply in vain.* When these fundamentals are neglected, we negate what we believe…what we celebrate this season: the honesty, the consideration, the kindness of a God who would speak to us with the frankness of John and then come to us in the gentleness and mystery of the Christ child.

John prepared the way, but even John could not fathom the meaning of Christ's presence in our world and in our lives. When we find ourselves in circumstances with losses that we are powerless to change, and when we have done what we can and our expectations are disappointed, God will be here, with us, holding us, honoring us and reminding us of the gifts that grow out of struggle. The God who joined us in our struggle, in the vulnerability of a child, this God will not abandon us. The God whose steadfast love and mercy is beyond all our expectations, this God will not disappoint us. This God has come into our lives so that we might be changed for good. Amen.